



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Contact: Kim Amendola – NOAA
(727) 403-6533
Laura Engleby – NOAA
(727) 551-5791

SER060214
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
February 14, 2006

NOAA Announces Immediate Restrictions on All Gillnet Fishing to Protect Right Whales off Georgia and Northeast Florida Coasts *Gillnet entanglement led to death of right whale calf*

NOAA Fisheries Service is temporarily prohibiting all gillnet fishing off Georgia and northeast Florida to protect North Atlantic right whales through the end of their calving season. This action is based on the service's determination that a right whale death, documented on January 22, 2006, was the result of an entanglement by gillnet gear. The closed area, known as the Southeast U.S. Restricted Area, extends from Savannah, Ga. though Sebastian Inlet, FL, and out to 80-degrees west longitude. This closure begins at 12:01 a.m. February 15 and extends through 11:59 p.m. March 31, 2006.

The Southeast U.S. Restricted Area is used predominantly by reproducing female right whales and their calves. If a serious injury or mortality of a right whale occurs in the Southeast U.S. Restricted Area from November 15 through March 31 as a result of an entanglement, NOAA Fisheries Service is legally required under the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan to close that area to that gear type. According to Dr. Bill Hogarth, assistant administrator for NOAA Fisheries Service, "This is a serious situation and we must take this action immediately to protect right whales."

The North Atlantic right whale population is now estimated to be approximately 300 animals and is listed as "Endangered" under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. NOAA Fisheries Service is directed by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 to reduce incidental serious injury and mortality of marine mammal stocks in commercial fishing operations. Hogarth continues on to say, "This closed area includes the only known calving ground for right whales and we need to protect them while they utilize this area."

On Sunday, January 22, 2006, at 10:30 a.m., recreational boaters reported the dead 18-foot right whale calf to the United States Coast Guard. The whale was towed to shore in Duval County where experts from the Marine Mammal Stranding Network performed a gross examination of the carcass. Dr. Michael Moore from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution led the examination and was assisted by scientists from NOAA Fisheries Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the University of Florida, and the Virginia Aquarium. Findings from the examination team indicate:

- The whale had a large wound extending most the length of its back. The wound occurred post-mortem and was not the result of a ship strike.
- The whale had a complex array of wounds around its tailstock (the narrow area of the body to which the tail is attached). The shapes of two wounds are consistent with predation (shark bites) that occurred prior to death. Most of the remaining wounds formed straight-line, vee-, and diamond-shaped patterns from entanglement in gillnet fishing gear.
- The calf was in good body condition, but it had not been able to nurse for at least a day prior to its death.

In addition, the New England Aquarium's right whale photograph database was consulted to determine the sighting history for the dead calf, and to help determine when and where the calf may have become entangled. The calf and its mother were first observed during routine NOAA-funded aerial surveys for right whales on December 30, 2005, off of St. Catherine's Island, Ga. They were sighted three additional times throughout early January off the northeast Florida and Georgia coasts. On January 21, one day before the calf was reported dead, the mother was observed alone exhibiting behavior consistent for an agitated whale. The calf's carcass was discovered the following day approximately one-nautical mile from where the mother was previously spotted.

NOAA Fisheries Service reviewed and considered the examination findings, sightings history, and activities of commercial gillnet fishing in the area when determining the need for this closure. While the immediate cause of death (e.g. drowning, infection, or dehydration) has not yet been determined, all available evidence suggests that entanglement and injury by gillnet gear ultimately led to the death of this right whale calf.

This is the second right whale calf to have died off of Florida's northeast coast this year. The first calf was reported on January 10 and preliminary findings suggest that the whale was killed by a ship strike.

NOAA Fisheries is committed to the protection of marine mammals. The agency has a law enforcement division dedicated not only to the investigation of law violations concerning marine mammals, but also living marine resources, endangered species, and many other conservation laws. The NOAA Fisheries Service Office for Law Enforcement has a national 24-hour hotline number for anyone to report a violation (1-800-853-1964). Violations reported by persons who wish to provide their personal information may be eligible for a reward.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries Service, please visit: www.nmfs.noaa.gov.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners and nearly 60 countries to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

– 30 –

Media Note:

Photos of this right whale can be downloaded from NOAA Fisheries Service at:
<http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2006/images/right-whale-florida-01-23-2006.jpg>
<http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2006/images/right-whale-florida2-01-23-2006.jpg>